THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

By
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Preface by
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PREFACE

FATHER HUMBERT CLÉRISSE was born at Rocamadour on the 13th October, 1864. He went to school at the Jesuit college of Avignon. At sixteen he decided to enter the Order of St. Dominic. The reading of Lacordaire’s Life of St. Dominick had revealed to him what his supernatural family would be. He carried out his plan at once with great determination. His mother being in the secret, he left his home for Sierra in Switzerland where he began his novitiate. He finished his studies at Rijkholt in Holland and was professed on the 30th August, 1882.

He preached much in France, still more in Italy, at Rome, at Florence (where he often preached during Lent for the French colony), and in England, especially in London. Everywhere God gave him the gift of bringing souls to the Church. When the French religious were dispersed in 1903, he left for London where he hoped to establish a French Dominican community. This foundation, on which he spent...
much time and zeal, fell through at the last moment and he returned to France. He still carried on his apostolic work, notably by preaching during Lent in Italy, but he preferred to preach retreats to religious communities, where he found minds more able to understand him and an environment in which his spirit could develop in its own way. Through this he was often the guest of the community of Solesmes, whom he loved dearly and who returned his affection in full. It was also a great joy for him to stay at Rijckholt, where, on one of his last visits, he presided over the entry into the Dominican Third Order of Ernest Psichari, whom he had received into the Church in February, 1913.

The dispersion of his Order had inflicted on him an incurable wound; he needed the life of the choir and that common fraternal dwelling together that, as David says, is so good and joyful and which forms, as it were, an abbreviated likeness of the Church. But if the world and contact with the world had made him suffer cruelly, he himself was more than ever a stranger to the world, more than ever occupied with God alone; his soul had risen into the realms of peace; in Dante’s phrase, it hid itself in the light. At the moment when, having come to the pleni-

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nude of his maturity, it might have been thought that he was about to give his fullness to men, he was suddenly withdrawn from this world. After a short illness, during which he could still offer Mass, he died in the night of the 15th-16th November, 1914. It was one of those very humble deaths which God seems to reserve for his closest friends.

Always, in conformity with that religious vocation to which he was so perfectly faithful, he had been reserved for God. God was indeed his portion and he was indeed the portion of God. And so his external life and his apostolic labours, whose details are little known because he never spoke of them, have only a secondary importance in our understanding of him. It might be said that God, helped—if I may speak in this way—by his own humility, wanted to keep all that in the shade and even, when one considers the influence that so great a soul would have seemed bound to have exercised, in a relative unsuccess. But it was in a more profound and mysterious manner that this soul acted—through the invisible radiation of his very being—by the supernatural light with which he was entirely penetrated.
Mystery of the Church

What struck one at first in Fr. Clérissac was the nobility of his presence and the intelligence, almost formidable from its penetration, which shone in his eyes. Hence at the first meetings, a sort of fear and a feeling that here was another who knew too well quid est in homine. This feeling disappeared later on when one got to know him better and became able to appreciate his love for souls and the great gentleness of his good nature.

But what formed the true distinction of his character was that marvellous purity of mind and heart which he so much loved in St. Dominic, and of which God had given him a large share. Purity, integrity, virginal vigour of soul, this, we think, is the deepest mark of his whole interior and exterior life.

He had so strong and true an idea of the divine Purity and Holiness that he used to wake up sometimes in the night quite trembling at the thought of appearing before that light that knows no shadow. Confo timente tuum earum meas. He knew well, he knew seriously and practically that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. He did not like people to be free and easy with God. He would meditate readily on the Divine transcendence of Him Whom we know only by analogy.

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When he thought of the saints, his mind always turned towards the great purifications which made them undergo those supreme interior trials in which God, withdrawing all sensible emotion and all light, desires the pure adhesion of their naked will. He saw in these great trials one of the distinctive marks of divine mysticism. Noli me tangere, he went to Jesus with an entirely immaterial spontaneity, wanting nothing that was not Jesus himself.

From this exquisite purity of heart came his
profound humility. He once said, with unusual energy: ‘The thirst for honours and offices is a sign of reprobation.’ In his relations with other people he maintained the most vigilant and delicate reserve, keeping himself hidden from everything that was not God.

He loved the truth with all his soul. His principal concern was to keep his outlook free from every trace of error. He loved the truth, he loved the intelligence because it lived on truth. ‘The Christian life,’ he often repeated, ‘has intelligence as its basis.’ He cherished St. Thomas in whom he was always finding new joys and new wonders. What he admired most in certain of his masters was that they lived the truth, fashioned their practical life out of doctrine and theology; and it is this that we find realized in him. The centre of his activity was in the contemplation of the truth. ‘Before all else, God is the Truth; go to Him, love Him under this aspect,’ he often said, commenting on St. Augustine’s phrase about eternal happiness: gaudium de veritate.

He loved the Church with all his soul. What he asked of those who came to him was to adhere fully to the mystery of the Church. In order to do this he thought that reason and faith needed to be helped by a living, tender charity which

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One can teach the soul the true nature of the Bride of Christ. And he thought that a certain coldness of heart and a certain self love, obscuring the mind on this point, were the principal reasons why some had strayed into the error of modernism.

He was proud of the Church. He loved the grandeur of the Church. He would not allow St. Gregory VII or Boniface VIII to be attacked. Every diminution of the rights of God and of the rights of the Church, and any slackness in claiming these rights, wounded him cruelly. I have always thought that Benson, who knew him well, had him in mind when he drew the Pope in Lord of the World.

As he loved the Church, so he loved the religious state and nothing was dearer to him than the dignity of that state. Correcting certain current errors, he would explain that what constitutes the specific value of the religious vows is the intervention of the Church who, by publicly accepting and officially consecrating the human person to God, like a chalice or an altar, puts that person into a state (status perfectionis acquirenda) which is indispensable for the full life of the mystical Body of Christ.

He developed a splendid teaching on the pro-
He greatly wished his brethren to preserve their intellectual race, as he called it, without alteration.

It can easily be guessed how such a soul must have had to suffer in an epoch like our own. He suffered in silence, but with a singular depth and intensity. It is only in certain descriptions of the great Pius X that I have felt some resemblance to his sadness.

It was not only the mode of life in our secularist and democratic regime that afflicted him. He had a stern idea of what the religious and priestly life demanded; the reality he met with did not always correspond to it; and the feeling of the responsibility of the salt of the earth in the history of the world weighed heavily upon him. He believed that the diminution of faith, the disappearance of all public recognition of the rights of God, and finally the weakening of reason in modern times, marked one of the lowest levels to which the world could descend.

The Mass, said Vincent Ferrer, is the highest work of contemplation.* I have never assisted and I believe I shall never again assist at Masses

* Missa est altius opus contemplationis quod possit esse (Serm. Sab. post Dom. Octavi).
which he described with so youthful an enthusiasm.

His conversation was full of charm and life. He expressed himself with a very great natural eloquence and in a language of classic purity. He loved everything that was beautiful, living and sincere. He constantly re-read Dante. He surrounded himself with the finest pictures of Angelico. But his chief delight was in the Dialogue and the Letters of St. Catherine of Siena. He had a profound devotion to this great Contemplative, whom the Church praises for having served the Lord like a diligent bee, sicut apis argumntosa... He was devoted also to his own Province and especially to the Sainte-Baume. Two other pilgrimages were dear to him: Laus, where one day, whilst he was giving communion, the holy shepherdess Benoite allowed him to smell the perfume from her tomb; and Salette, where he paid his last visit in 1912. He always spoke with deep emotion of the tears which the Blessed Virgin had poured forth there—to remind us, he said, of all the exigencies of the supernatural life and of compassion of heart.

It was a joy to him to honour the Blessed Virgin as the Queen of the angelic Spirits, the

Throne of Wisdom. He was happy when veneration was paid to the splendour of her intelligence, as it was in the Middle Ages; on one of the doors of Chartres, for example, she is represented surrounded by the seven liberal Arts. He told me one day that he believed that her habitual meditation must have been—but with what divine profundity—the most simple truths of faith, on the great law of the Cross in particular.

How can I explain what an incomparable guide he was in the spiritual life? I will only say that he always took his inspiration from the two masters of his heart, St. Paul and St. Thomas, and from Christian antiquity. The defect he ceaselessly pursued was 'the reflexive spirit,' as he called it; the spirit of turning back on one's self, of preoccupation with one's self. He was equally relentless against individualism and the tendency to make either feelings or exterior activity predominate. The higher the soul ascends, he would say, the more universal it becomes. The right way to go to God is to turn towards Him and to see; to keep the eyes fixed on divine truth and then allow God to have His way. He believed that the spirit of prayer and
of contemplation, the spirit of union with the Church, was of more value than ascetical exercises. The ladder which he used for the ascensions of his soul had two rungs: doctrine and the liturgy. The purely external definitions of the liturgy, which are often given, did not satisfy him at all. For him the liturgy was the very life of the Church, its life as Bride and Mother, the great sacramental which enabled souls to participate in all the mysteries of the life of Jesus Christ. He thought the idea that the liturgy and private prayer are opposed to each other to be absurd. But he held that, on the one hand, from the point of view of contemplation, the *opus Dei* is the supreme means of forming the soul to prayer; and on the other, in the sphere of the virtue of religion, private prayer, as the *vigilate semper*, is to be practised precisely in order to prepare the soul to take part worthily in that sovereign work of the liturgy in which the charity of the Church is poured out. *The participation in the hieratic life of the Church seems almost an end in itself, or at least as the supreme means towards the particular considerations of private prayer, since it is the sure entry into the particular mysteries of the life of Jesus Christ. To attempt, on this account,*
of a declining world and in part from the laws of growth and organic progress of the mystical Body of Christ. As a matter of fact he could not help preferring the grandeur, simplicity and divine spontaneity of the saints of the first ages who were nearer to Good Friday and Pentecost, to that undivided fullness of the great effusion of grace in which the Church was born. He preferred the Christ pantocrator of the Byzantines to the more sorrowfully human crucifix of our Middle Ages. He thought that the historical importance and the spiritual sublimity of the Fathers of the Desert could never be sufficiently insisted on. He who loved St. Thomas so much, who enjoyed attaching what he read in the Gospels to its setting in the Summa, nevertheless liked to repeat that the wisdom of St. Paul, rushing out from its source, wholly inspired, is more purely divine than the scientifically elaborated wisdom of the Summa Theologica.

He did not doubt that the authentic teaching of St. Teresa on the ways of union with God was substantially identical with that of the ancients. He knew that the saint who would 'have given her life for the least ceremony of the Church' was a true daughter of the great monastic tradition whose spirit she wanted to revive by restoring the rule of Blessed Albert. Further, speaking 'as a simple woman,' as she so often described herself, rather than as a theologian, if she felt bound to enter into psychological descriptions and analyses which the ancient teachers had neglected, this is because her providential mission was to fix in this way, for the needs of the modern intelligence, the age-long mysticism of the Church. Nevertheless, when it was a question of pointing out the general significance of the various forms imposed by the condition of the times on spiritual teaching, he wrote (in a letter to an Oblate of St. Benedict):

'Of Teresa has captivated you. That is quite natural and it is sometimes good to be reminded of the notion of acquired virtue and of positive effort by the example of the saints of the reflective age who without any doubt God raised up in order to show that whatever is good and true in individualism does not escape his Grace and issues from it; in part also, in condescending pity for men when the simple life of the Church no longer sufficed them,—finally from vindictive justice against the infidelities of the ancient Orders who, alas! allowed the torch in their hands to grow dim.'

'But do not forget that you belong to the
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Merovingian, the feudal times,—to the primitives. Do not forget that you must allow divine Grace to effect everything in you and to count the products of your own activity for almost nothing.'

He required everything that concerned the virtue of obedience to be envisaged in a most purely supernatural way. An order or a counsel received from a superior acting within the domain of his legitimate authority might be, in itself, ill-founded, inopportune, harmful to the interests of those it ought to serve. Nevertheless, unless the act prescribed is sinful, it should be deferred to; for it comes to us as a limping messenger from Him Whom we alone obey—our action passing through and beyond all the created hierarchies, and it is dependent upon that general and obscure government of Providence which makes the worst human infirmities serve a greater good.

Father Clérisseau was certain that even when no express precept has been given it is always possible to pick out the pure spiritual line which gives to the virtue of obedience the direction marked out for it by God. He added, however, that such a deference to authority demands the

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most delicate discernment according to the degrees and species of subordination and of commands. For obedience is concerned with a docility of the practical judgement which is both living and free, and not with a servile and mechanical carrying out of commands. Although, for example, he was firmly attached to his monarchist convictions, he deplored that French Catholics had been so lacking in obedience to Leo XIII; and he equally blamed some for having given less, and others more, than a filial and intelligent deference demanded. How many other examples he could have given of such absence of obedience in spirit and in truth to the wishes of the Pope!

He dedicated these refinements of obedience, these reserves, this chastity of the will primarily to God. He was a man of great desires; and it seems that God was so contented with the sight of these pure desires that he allowed very few of them to be satisfied. I see now that to the extent to which immediate realizations were refused him, to that extent he was acting for the future and not for his actual time—an example of that absolutely mysterious action of an instrument of divine Causality which breaks through space and time. I can still remember him talking to me of
these things as we were walking one evening in front of the cathedral of Versailles outlined in dark splendour in the clear night. 'Jacques,' he said, 'the fact that a work is quite evidently useful for the good of souls is not sufficient reason for us to rush to carry it out. It is necessary that God should wish it for this precise moment (in that case there must be no delay); and God has His own time. It must first be desired, and be enriched and purified by that desire. It will be divine at this cost. And the man who will be charged with carrying it out will not perhaps be the one who has best understood it. We should beware of a human success that is too complete and too striking; it may conceal a curse. Let us not go faster than God. It is our emptiness and our thirst that He needs, not our plenitude.'

Of all the vast dreams into which Father Clérissac poured his desire, some, since his day, have begun to be accomplished. Others than he have entered into the harvest. Nevertheless he saw its promise. When I recall how he prayed that intelligence and beauty should come back to their Lord, and when to-day I see so many signs of such a return, I feel the great significance of the fact that he was a witness at the Catholic death of a poet so tragically representative as poor Oscar Wilde.*

... The last sermons of Fr. Clérissac—at least in France—were those for the month of Mary, preached in 1914 at Notre Dame de Lorette. I cannot describe the impression of gentleness, simplicity, holiness and supernatural tenderness which these sermons conveyed. It was a pure effort of the soul to make the knowledge and love of God and of the Blessed Virgin penetrate into the very depths of the human heart.

It seems that in these last years his charity, meekness and recollection deepened still further. On one of the last occasions that I saw him he told me that his thoughts were turning with a singular happiness to the days of his novitiate, that it was a great mistake for a religious to want to 'emancipate' himself from the practices of the novitiate, and that it was essential to remain faithful to the humblest of these practices in

* Fr. Clérissac never spoke to me about Wilde. But I understand from Mrs. Bellamy Storey that he once said to her that he was sure that Wilde had died a Catholic, for he was there. Mr. Robert Ross (cf. Revue Eucharistique, 18th November, 1921) on the other hand, designates Fr. Cuthbert Dunn as having given Wilde baptism and extreme unction. Have the names been confused? In any case the statement reported by Mrs. B. S. must mean at least that Fr. Clérissac was informed of everything at the time it took place, doubtless by the priest who assisted Wilde.
order to keep always a childlike attitude towards God and to maintain the soul in the disposition for prayer. 'If we only knew what it means to pray!' he added. 'It is so rare that we really pray! When we are well recollected, when we have a certain feeling of the presence of God, when we have impulses towards Him—then we think we are praying. In reality we are still only at what is prerequisite for prayer. . . .'

His soul had become mature like a ripe fruit; the time for gathering it was at hand: Et cum produxerit fructus, statim mittit falcem quoniam adest messis.*

Father Clérissac had written two volumes which, in spite of their value, could not, on account of his excessive reserve, reveal what manner of man he was: L'Ame Sainte and De saint Paul à Jésus-Christ. Then he wrote a brochure on Fra Angelico, and later he published privately a few copies of a triduum,† full of admirable doctrine, on St. Joan of Arc, 'the messenger of divine politics,' as he called her. Then there is a sermon on L'Amour propre dans l'étude et dans la vie. Many monasteries preserve

* Mark iv. 29.
† La Bienheureuse Jeanne d'Arc, a monastic triduum, Abbey of Notre Dame, Oosterhout, 1919.
we see that since His time the Church and the influence of the Gospel have so little changed the natural order of things, then we come into contact with a life implicated in our present life and which is not only added to it, but which absolutely transcends it as it transcends all our human hopes and all our human aspirations. If we take away the light thrown on these ideas by the supernatural they lose their strength and cease to harmonize with the initial mystery of the Incarnation. If the supernatural is eliminated from exegesis the writings of St. Paul are those of a lunatic."

The present volume contains Fr. Clérissac's last work. By publishing it we fulfil a duty in which joy and sadness are mingled; for this summary, very substantial but almost too condensed, was not revised by its author and remains incomplete. Fr. Clérissac intended to develop certain parts, and he wanted to rewrite Chapter VII on the Mission and the Spirit. He died before he had written the last chapter on the Feasts of the Mystery of the Church. It is thus a collection of thoughts and fragments rather than a treatise to which we give publicity. But still we are confident that many souls will find in this lofty Meditation, interrupted by death, the nourishment they need.

PRELIMINARIES

Turpis est omnis pars universo suo non congruens. Any part which does not harmonize with its whole, St. Augustine remarks,* is deformed. Thus a Christian degrades himself and decays to the extent in which he is removed from unity with the Church—the universe and source of life for each of the faithful. 'To be a member,' says Pascal, 'is to have neither life, being, nor movement, except through the spirit of the body and for the body.'

There is no such thing as individual Christianity, and the faith which justifies is directed to an object proposed to all by the common Mother of the baptized. Whether faith is mysteriously infused into the soul of a child or whether it is a triumph of grace over the will of an adult, it immediately incorporates both the one and the other into the Church as necessarily as it makes them sons of God.

* Conf., iii. 8.